

3.5 PUBLIC USE

Currently, hunting and fishing are the most common public recreational uses within AVWA and SCWA. Other recreation uses include wildlife observation and photography. The primary public use of the lands within AVWA and SCWA over the last century has been cattle and sheep grazing. Historically, small-scale logging operations were centered on a mill located near Antelope Creek. The remains of the lumber mill are now an archeological site. Mineral exploration occurred within AVWA under a special use permit in the 1990s, but no mineral production has occurred. Grazing is the only nonrecreational public use still occurring; cattle have grazed within AVWA in recent years under a memorandum of understanding with the Tahoe National Forest. No other commercial activities take place in the wildlife areas.

The following sections describe these current recreational and other public uses and the current regulations and management policies related to the uses.

3.5.1 RECREATION AT ANTELOPE VALLEY AND SMITHNECK CREEK WILDLIFE AREAS

Recreational activities at AVWA and SCWA are facilitated by the accessibility of the lands from paved state highways and paved and unpaved county roads. Despite this good access, AVWA and SCWA receive only moderate amounts of recreational use, which is focused primarily on hunting and fishing. Other activities include dispersed primitive camping and wildlife observation. Although not authorized on Department lands, off-highway vehicle (OHV) use occurs to varying degrees of intensity throughout the two areas.

HUNTING

The Department estimates that a few hundred hunters visit AVWA and SCWA each year, and deer hunting is one of the major uses of the units during the late summer and fall open seasons. The primary attraction for hunters is Rocky Mountain mule deer, which are the largest deer in the state, both in terms of body size and antlers. AVWA and SCWA are within Deer Zone X-7a, which includes most of eastern Sierra County, as well as portions of Plumas County and Lassen County to the north and Nevada County to the south. X zones are managed as premium hunting areas, with a preference-based drawing system used to distribute a limited number of deer tags each year (Department 2007a). (Additional details on deer tag quotas and deer hunting regulations applicable to AVWA and SCWA are provided below.) Deer tags for this and other X zones are highly coveted, with many more applications each year than available tags. A total of 315 tags were available for Zone X-7a for the 2007 season (Department 2007b).

While the total estimated number of deer taken by hunters within Zone X-7a during the past 5 years (2002–2006) has ranged from 75 to 139 deer (Department 2007c), kill location data derived from deer tag report cards submitted by hunters indicate a dozen or fewer deer were taken in or near AVWA and SCWA each of those years, with the exception of 2002, when about 17 were taken (Department 2007d).

Although deer hunting is the primary form of hunting at AVWA and SCWA, opportunities also exist for hunting small game, such as rabbits and tree squirrels and upland game birds, such as grouse, quail, and turkey. The area is not good bear habitat, although bear may pass through the area; therefore, only incidental bear hunting is likely to occur. In general, hunting for species other than deer is infrequent at AVWA and SCWA.

FISHING

Smithneck, Badenaugh, and Bear Valley Creeks have historically been stocked with rainbow, brook, and brown trout (see Section “3.3.4 Fish Communities”) and all have been noted for their high densities of trout, which provide excellent angling opportunities. Smithneck Creek is thought to provide some of the highest quality angling for brown trout anywhere in California, with the upper reach (above Badenaugh Creek) supporting the highest densities of fish. Although the level of angling activity on these creeks is not known, both creeks are

easily accessible on foot from the Sierra Brooks subdivision. Antelope Valley Creek within AVWA does not provide fishing opportunities. Informal observation by Department staff and patrol suggest that the level of activity is light.

OTHER RECREATION ACTIVITIES

Special regulations authorize camping at AVWA only from May 1 through October 31. Trailers are not allowed. Informal observations by Department staff indicate that camping use is very low, with most camping occurring during the deer hunting season. In the past, informal deer camps have been seen near access roads.

No designated trails exist within the wildlife areas; therefore, trail-oriented activities such as hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding are uncommon. These uses may occur infrequently along Antelope Valley Road and Bear Valley Road and undesignated dirt roads branching off the county roads.

The variety of wildlife present within AVWA and SCWA, particularly in riparian areas, and the relatively easy access to these areas from county roads provide good opportunities for wildlife observation and photography. The Sierra Valley has been nationally recognized by the Audubon Society as an Important Bird Area (National Audubon Society 2004), and birders coming to the valley may also spend time in the wildlife areas, given their proximity to the valley and the opportunity for viewing species that are not present or as common in the open sagebrush and wetland habitats of the valley. In particular, visitors have good opportunities to observe raptors such as rough legged and ferruginous hawks, prairie falcons, and golden and bald eagles. The riparian areas provide opportunities to observe a variety of songbirds.

The Feather River Archery Club has in the past maintained a temporary archery range within SCWA. The club has expressed interest in developing a permanent archery range, open to the public and operated by the club. Such a facility would require a special use permit.

3.5.2 UNAUTHORIZED USES

California Code of Regulations, Section 550(b)(6)(A) precludes recreational OHV use on Department lands. However, illegal OHV use has regularly occurred on both AVWA and SCWA throughout their tenure as public lands. The California Vehicle Code prohibits OHV use on Antelope Valley Road and other public roads in the area but this prohibition is not well enforced. Substantial resources have been degraded by OHV near Bear Valley Creek and within adjacent wet meadows within SCWA, including soil compaction, erosion, and rutting. A primary source of this activity appears to be the adjacent Sierra Brooks subdivision. Some riders may be crossing Department lands on their way to authorized and unauthorized trails and other riding opportunities on adjacent Tahoe National Forest lands.

Other unauthorized uses that are sometimes observed on other wildlife areas and public lands in general, such as dumping of debris and trash and unauthorized camping or squatting, have not been observed to any visible degree.

3.5.3 OTHER ACTIVITIES

The current AVWA management plan (Department 1997) makes the area available for class trips, research, and other projects for local schools and other groups, with issuance of a permit by the Department's Region 2 manager.

The Smithneck Creek and Antelope Valley Creek watersheds have been the site of several data collection efforts and research projects in recent years, as the scientific and conservation community has focused interest and effort on learning about the effects of the recent large fires on the vegetation regime, fish and wildlife, and streams and has investigated ecological restoration options for the streams and the Sierra Valley. Although most of this activity has not taken place specifically within AVWA or SCWA, stream monitoring has taken place at various locations within the areas.

The SVRCD has worked with the Department and USFS on a long-term management plan for Antelope Valley, and has worked with the University of California Cooperative Extension to conduct water quality monitoring at Smithneck Creek, with a monitoring site near the Sierra Brooks subdivision, just outside the SCWA boundary (California Department of Conservation 2006). The Department has also engaged in ecological restoration actions since 1995 under the Smithneck Creek CRMP developed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture NRCS, the Tahoe National Forest, Sierra Brooks Homeowners Association, and other landowners and cooperators (University of California, Davis 2007).

3.5.4 POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RECREATION DEVELOPMENT

Extensive recreational development within AVWA and SCWA would not be compatible with Department policies for wildlife areas, which state, “Except for hunting and fishing purposes, only minimum facilities to permit other forms of multiple recreational uses...shall be provided” (Fish and Game Code, Section 1528). However, the addition of regulatory and informational signage could facilitate resource protection as well as visitor enjoyment and appreciation of the areas. The 1997 AVWA management plan proposed coordinating with the Tahoe National Forest to add boundary markers and interpretive signage at the area entrance that describe Department ownership and explain management plans and objectives. The proposed restoration project on Antelope Valley Creek would present a new opportunity to develop interpretive information for visitors explaining the habitat enhancement methods and objectives of the project. Such information could be presented in kiosks located near travel routes in good wildlife viewing areas, with parking space provided for a few vehicles. Such kiosks could also present wildlife area maps and regulations.

3.5.5 PUBLIC USE REGULATIONS

The Department manages AVWA and SCWA under Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, Sections 550 (General Public Use Activities) and 551 (Hunting, Firearms, and Archery Equipment Use and Permit Requirements), and the California Fish and Game Code, Sections 1525–1530 (the Regulations) (Department 2007). The Department strives to carry out management responsibilities related to public use as identified in the existing management plans and in keeping with the agency mission to manage the resources for the “use and enjoyment by the public.” As state wildlife areas, wildlife and habitat protection and enhancement are the primary management purposes within AVWA and SCWA; recreation and public use are secondary to habitat preservation.

3.5.6 HUNTING REGULATIONS

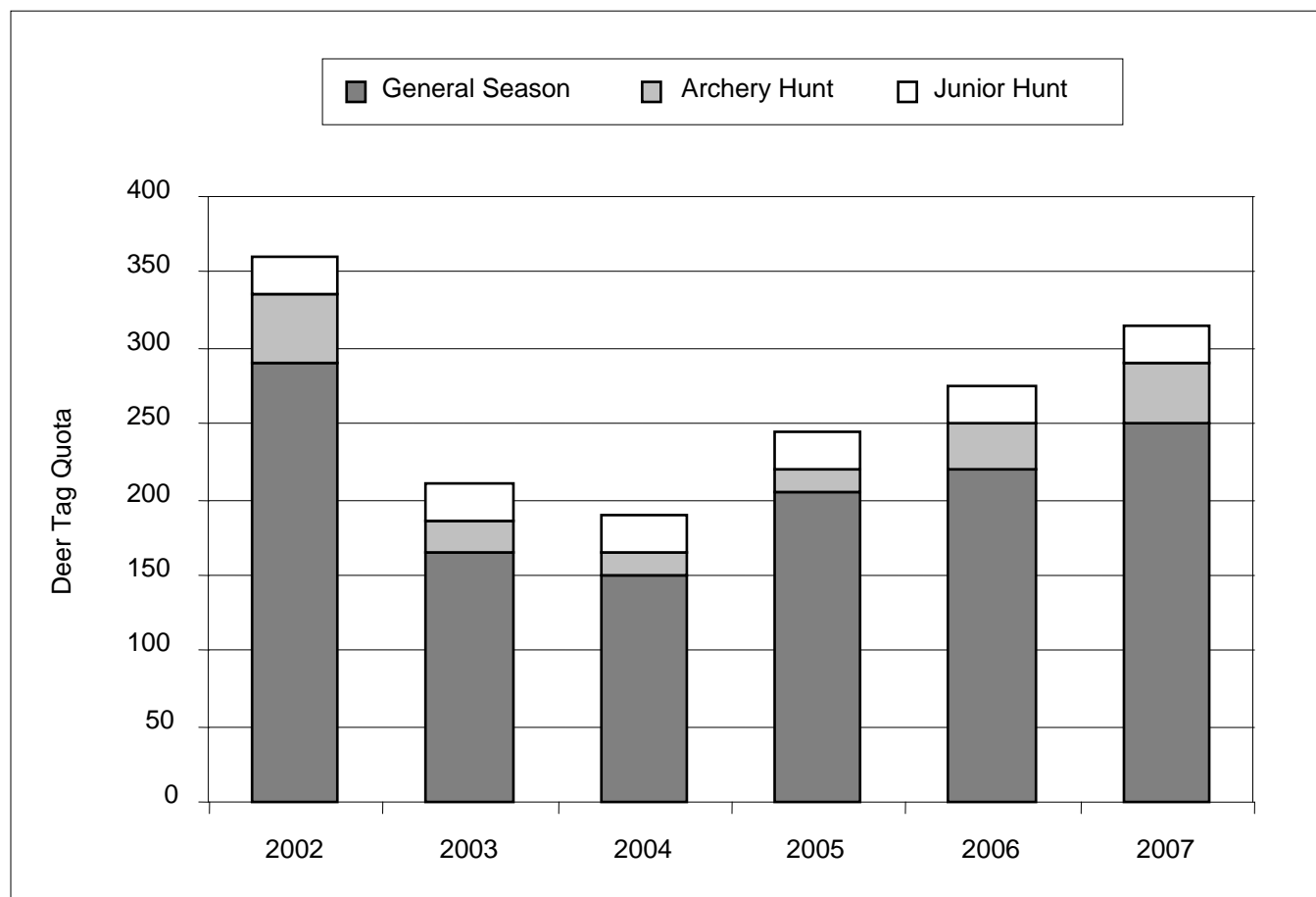
The Regulations provide management direction for lands associated with hunting activities on federally and state-owned lands in California. The Regulations include hunting license provisions and requirements, application and fee information, hunting practices and regulations, permit requirements, and firearms and archery equipment regulations in each hunting area.

AVWA and SCWA are designated as Type C hunting areas by the Regulations. As Type C hunting areas, a permit or pass is not required for most uses. Special regulations for AVWA have established July 1 through January 31 as hunt days during open seasons for authorized species (Title 14, Section 551[q]).

As noted above, both AVWA and SCWA are within Deer Zone X-7a. Deer hunt tags for X zones are distributed during a special Big Game Drawing held each June, according to an annually variable quota. The deer tag quota will vary from year to year based on the health of the deer herd in the area and the number of bucks available for harvest. The general season quota for Zone X-7a has ranged between 150 and 250 tags during the past five seasons (Department 2007c). Prospective hunters pay an application fee to participate in the drawing. The general season for deer opens on the first Saturday in October and extends for 16 consecutive days. The general season tags allow hunting during the general season only, using a muzzleloading or centerfire rifle, shotgun, authorized pistol or revolver, crossbow or bow (Department 2007a).

Additional tags are issued each year for a Zone X-7a Area-Specific Archery Hunt and a Junior Hunt. The Archery Hunt begins on the third Saturday of August and extends for 23 days; the Archery Hunt quota for Zone X-7a has ranged between 15 and 40 tags during the past five seasons (Department 2007b). The Junior Hunt (open to hunters less than 16 years old with a Junior Hunting License and accompanied by an adult 18 years of age or older) is scheduled for the same period as the general hunt, but is an either-sex hunt. The Junior Hunt quota for Zone X-7a has been 25 tags each of the past five seasons (Department 2007b).

The graph below illustrates the variation in Zone X-7a deer tag quotas for the general, Archery and Junior Hunts between 2002 and 2007.



Source: Department 2007b, 2007c

Zone X-7a Deer Tag Quotas

Exhibit 3.5-1

The bag and possession limit for the general season and the Archery Hunt is one buck, forked horn or better, per tag; for the Junior Hunt the limit is one either-sex deer per tag (Department 2007e).

The Regulations also specify hunting seasons within Class C wildlife areas for resident small game mammals such as rabbit, fox, and tree squirrel; nongame mammals such as bobcat, coyote, skunks, raccoon, and opossum; and game birds such as dove, quail, grouse, and turkey. Hunting and trapping of furbearing mammals such as beaver, mink, muskrat, and raccoon is permitted during designated seasons. Skunk and opossum may also be taken at any time of year (Department 2007e). Trapping of furbearers requires a trapping license. Allowable methods for commercial and recreational trapping have been greatly restricted in the state since 1999 following voter's approval of Proposition 4, and leg-hold and other forms of body-gripping traps are prohibited (Department

2007f). Hunters taking resident or migratory game birds such as quail, grouse, turkey, and mourning doves must have a current state upland game bird stamp (Department 2007g).

The Regulations permit bear hunting in the area of the state encompassing AVWA and SCWA during a season opening on the second Saturday in October and extending 79 consecutive days, or fewer days if the Department determines that 1,700 bears have been taken (Department 2007e).

3.5.7 FISHING REGULATIONS

All anglers must display a California Sport Fishing License on their outer clothing while fishing. Resident and nonresident anglers may choose from one-day, two-day, 10-day, and annual licenses. In addition, Title 14, Chapter 3 provides special regulations relating to trout fishing and designates Sierra County as part of the Sierra District for the purposes of those regulations. Section 7 designates season and bag limit regulations for trout species within the Sierra District. Open season on the streams within AVWA and SCWA begins the last Saturday in April and extends through November 15. The limit is five fish per day and no more than 10 fish in possession (Department 2007h).